

Swimming in the Illinois River

The Illinois River is Oklahoma's most popular destination for canoeing and other outdoor activities that may involve contact with water. Because of its importance as a Scenic River, the Illinois River has been intensely monitored by the Oklahoma Water Resources Board, the US Geological Survey and other groups, including universities. Information from this monitoring indicates that there are times when the water in the river exceeds EPA's recommended microorganism standards for human contact. This is not the case every day, but it happens often enough that people should take precautions when using the river.

When swimming in lakes, rivers and streams, one can be almost certain that some bacteria, viruses, protozoa and other microorganisms are present in the water. Some of these organisms are indigenous to surface waters while others are carried from wastewater sources including septic systems and runoff from animal and wildfowl areas. Swimmers themselves are also sources of bacteria.

Conditions that favor the growth of these organisms include water temperatures above 80°F, shallow or unmoving water and excessive algal growth. During extended periods of very warm weather, small bodies of water may reach temperatures warm enough to support a variety of microorganisms.

A small proportion of these microorganisms are associated with human illnesses. One kind of organism that may be responsible for human disease is bacteria. Some types of bacteria can cause diarrhea and nausea; others can cause nose and throat infections. Data shows that bacteria are present in the Illinois River.

Swimmers should take the following steps to reduce exposure to waterborne microorganisms:

DON'T

- Don't swim in water with a temperature greater than 80°F (If the water does not feel cool when you first enter it, then it is likely greater than 80°F).
- Don't swim if you have cuts or scrapes.
- Don't swim after a heavy rain.
- Don't swim near storm drains.
- Don't swim in stagnant (unmoving) water.
- Don't swim in water with a green surface scum.



DO

- Do shower with soap and water after swimming.
- Do wash cuts & scrapes with clean water and soap after swimming.
- Do hold nose or wear nose plugs when jumping into water.
- Do wear ear plugs.
- Do wear swim goggles.
- Do take children to the restroom frequently.
- Do use swim diapers on infants.
- Do stay away from any area that has floating debris, oil sheens or dead fish.

For additional information on this subject you may contact your local DEQ representative or the Water Quality Division of the Department of Environmental Quality at (405) 702-8100.